

Presence and absence

Thomas More, humanist, dramatic character,
and Fernando de Mello Moser

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Early representatives of Renaissance humanism such as Pico della Mirandola, Desiderius Erasmus and Thomas More strongly helped in paving the way to *the human* to which Shakespeare, roughly a century later, would give the most accomplished literary form, as underlined by Harold Bloom (*The Invention of the Human*). Although with obvious differences in literary scope, the universalism of Renaissance humanism unites Thomas More and Shakespeare to Fernando de Mello Moser (1927-1984). According to the enthusiast and controversial Portuguese scholar in 1968, Thomas More did surpass Shakespeare in his universalism: “It may seem an audacity to consider [Thomas More] the most universal of the English, a classification which, certainly with the best of the reasons, the majority would attribute to Shakespeare.”¹ What were the reasons for such a classification? This essay tries to shed light on this question.

Humanism did not die with the Catholic Renaissance, nor was it invented in Germany in the 19th century, along with the coinage of the word *Humanismus* by F. H. Niethammer (Davies, *Humanism*: 10). It is well known that “humanism” has a wide range of contradictory meanings, and as a concept its history is a long continuous,

complex process, associated with endless forms of thought, action and language. The contradictory roots of humanism date back to the origins of civilization, and every historical age has absorbed, evaluated and developed it according to the prevailing cultural standards. It is therefore not surprising that humanism appears contradictory and sometimes devoid of meaning. The 20th century was tragic for humanism with notorious uses of it as word, concept and metaphor, that triggered critical thinkers and philosophers to defend, elaborate and propose first an anti-humanism, and later on a post-humanism. Yet even in the most intense catastrophic moments of the 20th century – like the two world wars, the rise and consolidation of totalitarian political regimes, or the severe crisis lived in democratic countries – the hope for a constructive and brighter side of the human also never dwindled.

Carrying the continuity of Christian humanism, of its tradition and scholarship, was a major task of Fernando de Mello Moser's academic life. In that sense, Thomas More is a central reference in the thought and work of the Portuguese scholar, a fact linked with the circumstance that he was for generations the main interpreter, researcher and mediator of the English Medieval and Renaissance culture in his country. History, literature and theatre are instrumental in understanding the thought and cultural meaning of Thomas More. If Shakespeare is known for his *absence*, for his dramatic impersonation, Thomas More counter-points this literary absence with his historical and humanist presence, underlining what he may have first learned from Pico della Mirandola (cf. Moser, *Caminhos*: 46-47): the meaning and practice, timeless and universal, of a constructive and tolerant humanism. In this aspect, the life and work of Thomas More and Fernando de Mello Moser do converge at a point where it sheds light on the contradictions of human nature, beyond Englishness or nationality.

Since the 1980s advances in scholarship have been made regarding the textual problems raised by the anonymous and collaborative play *Sir Thomas More*. Criticism proposed initially the years of 1593 or 1595. According to John Jowett – on his textual edition of the play published in 2011, and which Mello Moser would have praised – *Sir Thomas More*

was probably first drafted around 1600, roughly at the time when Shakespeare was working on *Julius Caesar* (*Sir Thomas More*: 430).² It is also fairly probable that the text underwent further revision in 1604. In historical terms this would situate the complex composition of “Sir Thomas More” in the transition between the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, between a Protestant monarch and a monarch with Catholic sympathies.

The text was not offensive to King Henry VIII (mentioned in the play as “the king”) or to his daughter Queen Elizabeth, but even so the chronicle-play was never performed during its historical period and remained unnoticed until the 20th century, although not completely forgotten by scholars and palaeographers. The protagonist, Thomas More, combines features of honesty, humanism and tolerant universalism, the very opposite psychology of a typical Shakespearian villain. Obviously his virtue is not Machiavellian, although the historical Thomas More did pen a *History of Richard III* which is one of the sources for Shakespeare’s *Richard III*. Cautious as it is, the play *Sir Thomas More* was not innocuous and it was banished from stage, a fact that proves how strong religious and political censorship was in the times of Shakespeare. The coexistence of opposite paradigms was not easy to accept by the authorities, as John Jowett remarks: “Of the play’s two disparate and potentially conflicting narratives, one invokes Protestant English nationhood, the other celebrates the life of a Catholic dissenter” (*Sir Thomas More*: 68). This ideological conflict suggests that the martyr’s coherence, courage, mildness and his resolute disobedience to the tyrannical *Realpolitik* of Henry VIII, and his acceptance of death were still embarrassing in England *circa* 1600. Historical distance and evidence enlightened the crucial role that the Master of the Revels, that is, the censor, had in the fate of the manuscript of *The Book of Thomas More*, when he forbade its performance on grounds that scenes showing Londoners rioting might set a bad example for spectators, and also that the final scene depicting Thomas More’s death and its motives, should be reworked if the text was to be performed. The political concern of the last objection is clear, but the first seems more debatable and perhaps a weak justification for prohibiting the play, for we find examples of infuriated mobs in Shakespeare,

from the early *Henry VI, Part 2* (IV, ii), which depicts the uprising of Jack Cade, to *Julius Caesar* and *Coriolanus*, which begin with scenes depicting tumults (*Sir Thomas More*: 428). In fact, if Shakespeare was not fond of religious controversy, he did privilege the problem and extension of the practice of tyranny, as one of his major themes.³ One concludes that the depiction of Thomas More as hero was not politically correct, especially because the shadowy absence of King Henry VIII, his antagonist, and father of Queen Elizabeth I, hovers over the entire text of the play.

Sir Thomas More was written and revised by several hands, a means of protecting the writers' identity and a consequence of the collaborative nature of the work at that time Mello Moser refers them: Anthony Munday, Henry Chettle, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, Shakespeare, the "Hand D", whose contribution of 147 verses is well known as most probably his only surviving manuscript ("Tomás More e o Teatro": 165; *Caminhos*: 149-50), and the anonymous transcriber and coordinator of the work, or "Hand C".⁴ Since the publication of Mello Moser's book on Thomas More in 1982 the critical knowledge of the play has grown. It is now accepted that the main author of *Sir Thomas More* is the enigmatic religious controversialist Anthony Munday who, after the objections to the text made by the Master of the Revels, Edmund Tilney, decided to revise it with the help of other writers. The anonymous text, collective and fragmented, was again rejected by the censor and this time sent to oblivion.⁵ Edmund Tilney, an aristocrat with family connections to the court of Henry VIII, was therefore crucial not only in splintering but also in shaping of the text of *Sir Thomas More*.

With a complex and puzzling editorial history, it is not surprising to find Shakespeare associated with the writing of this biographic tragic play, not because it proves his Catholicism, as it was sometimes fashionable to think in the 1990's, but because he was interested in the dramatic potential of remarkable personalities living on the borderlines of ideologies.⁶ Shakespeare knew obviously that Thomas More had been an eminent Catholic, but it is not strictly as a Catholic that Thomas More-the-character is mainly depicted, at least to a 21st century audience.⁷ The protagonist has an *ethos* suggestive of Socrates

and Jesus, of a prophet-martyr and a former political man in top positions, although behaving towards his fellow men and women with generosity, humbleness and transcendental sainthood. The conflicting plot of *Sir Thomas More* suggests that nobody was indifferent to Thomas More, from the poorest creature to the highest ranking aristocrats, and even if the action ends in catastrophe, it also contains many moments underlining the good nature of the protagonist.

As Mello Moser remarked the protagonist is submitted to the power of the Wheel of Fortune, the Medieval-Renaissance symbolic motive of fate, which depicts the rise and fall of a human destiny (*Caminhos*: 148-9, 153), in particular of representative men. The text transposes and adapts to drama, mediated by the literary sources of the time,⁸ two key fictionalized moments in the life of Thomas More: his role as Sheriff of London in solving peacefully the xenophobic riots which occurred in London on the 3th of May 1517; and his tragic death, the outcome of his opposition, now as Lord Chancellor, to Henry VIII's divorce of Catherine of Aragon, and to sign "the 1534 Oath of Succession recognizing Henry heirs by his new wife Anne Boleyn as successors to the crown" (*Sir Thomas More*: 1). Thomas More was executed for treason on the 6th July 1535. These two moments are embodied in two long parallel symmetrical sequences in *Sir Thomas More*, and which mirror one another: one depicting the political rise of the protagonist (scenes 1-7) and the other his tragic fall. This structure however does not strictly follow the biography of Thomas More and "equals" two disparaging episodes distant in time to dramatic convention. He was also a Londoner and the city of London, like a silent character and spectator, is felt throughout the play as an important unifying element.

During the first dramatic sequence More-the-character is shown as a pacifist-pacifier, and example of excellence in the use of language as action, a paradoxically powerful non-action against disruptive violence. As protagonist he stands between an infuriated mob and an unscrupulous and dangerous group of foreign (actually two Lombard)⁹ merchants. Only with perlocutory power, his economic eloquence and unarmed presence is he able to re-establish peace and public order. As Mistress Doll,¹⁰ a London married woman and former victim of the

menacing merchants, remarks: “Well, Sheriff More, thou has done with thy good words then all they could with their weapons [...]” (6.194). But Thomas More-the-character does not accept his protagonism in quelling these or other events, for: “[...] God hath made weak More His instrument/To thwart sedition’s violent intent” (6.207-8), and that “My service is my king’s. Good reason why,/Since life or death hangs on our sovereign’s eye” (6.235-36).

In the first of the comic intermezzos between the rise and fall sequences (scenes 8 and 9), the witty humanist plays a practical joke on Erasmus of Rotterdam. The scene also serves to depict continental cosmopolitan Renaissance humanism in contrast with the violent behaviour of foreigners at the beginning of the play. Erasmus who lived in Cambridge several years, did visit in London three times his close friend and long-term correspondent Thomas More, in 1499, 1505 and 1509, historical evidence which don’t match with the events depicted in the play (*Sir Thomas More*: 136). Erasmus did publish in the early 16th century the allegoric satire *The Praise of Folly* (1509), where “Folly” stands for immortal madness. Originally written in Latin, the book has a Greek phrase in the title which recalls a pun on More’s name: *Morias Encomion id est: Stultitiae Laus*.¹¹ As Fernando de Mello Moser remarked, the writing of *Utopia* (1516 in Latin) might have been conceived by Thomas More as an answer to the *Praise of Folly*, where Wisdom in *Nowhere Land* replies to Folly, the ruler of the real world (*Caminhos*: 47-48). The fictional meeting of More and Erasmus, in which the Earl of Surrey, another anachronistic character which is present throughout the action,¹² also participates, serves as back-drop for a *quid pro quod* recalling the classical theme of the mistaken identities, but with a moral ending, where knowledge, tolerance and lively humour are shown as not necessarily incompatible. The action revolves mainly around the comic effect a Thomas More’s double has on Erasmus not totally convinced of the witty exchange of identities conceived by his friend. When Erasmus realizes that he is being cheated by a false Thomas More, the “real” one enters to clarify the intentional confusion: “Fool, painted barbarism, retire thyself/ Into thy first creation./ [Exit the false Thomas More.]¹³ “Thus you see,/ My loving learned friends, how far respect/ Waits often on the ceremo-

nious train/ Of base illiterate wealth, whilst men of schools,/ Shrouded in poverty, are counted fools" (8.196).

Scene 9 introduces a short morality, "The Marriage of Wit and Wisdom",¹⁴ imbedded in the main drama, recalling the similar construction of the "play within the play" in *Hamlet*. Thomas More-the-character discusses its staging with the "Lord Cardinal's Players" before the banquet served in honour of the Lord Mayor of London. It is also an allusion to "More's upbringing as a page in the household of Cardinal Morton" (*Sir Thomas More*: 71). The action explores the question of whether it is possible or not to marry wit and wisdom (an absent character) when Inclination (or vice) is nearby, and Thomas More-the-character himself impersonates the dramatic character Good Counsel. The action however is cut abruptly short with the summoning of Thomas More to the Court.

Although the historical and biographical connection is non-existent, this was perhaps the best solution the playwrights found to introduce the second long sequence which deals grimly with Thomas More imprisonment and death. When the executioner asks Thomas More forgiveness for what he is soon to perpetrate, to whom More replies:

I had rather it were in thy power to forgive me, for thou hast the sharpest action against me; the law, my honest friend, lies in thy hands now. ([Gives him] *his purse*.) here's thy fee; and, my good fellow, let my suit be dispatched presently; for tis all one pain, to die a lingering death, and to live in the continual mill of a lawsuit. (17.89-98)

His rhetoric and logic, again paradoxical, is more powerful than the (ironically liberating) action of the executioner, by conveying the ideas of martyrdom, innocence and acceptance of compulsory but transcendental death, thus revealing the exemplary human being. By overcoming the drive of *fear and trembling* – which in the 19th century would draw the attention of Søren Kierkegaard – Thomas More accepts to sacrifice his life, without resentment, and to comply with the social, historic and metaphysical forces, but without rejecting his humanist and religious beliefs. The same irony is felt before in the sequence when the protagonist answers prophetically to his frightened wife:

“[...] the King, of his grace,/ Seeing my faithful service to his state,/ Intends to send me to the King of Heaven/ For a rich present; where my soul shall prove/ A true rememberer of his majesty” (13.85-89).

It is worth mentioning that Mello Moser did not forget the importance of Robert Bolt (1924-1995) to the reassessment of Thomas More in the second half of the 20th century (*Caminhos*: 161-65). *Sir Thomas More* had its first performance in 1922 at the Birkbeck College, University of London, but until 1964 for its first public professional performance in England by the Nottingham Playhouse, with the young Shakespearean actor Ian McKellen as protagonist (*Sir Thomas More*: 108-9, 119-21). This was done during the celebrations of Shakespeare's birth centenary, and under the impact at the time of the influential play about Thomas More, *A Man for All Seasons* by Robert Bolt, first a radio play (1954), after TV (1957) and theatre plays (1960), and later adapted to a film by Fred Zinnemann (1966).¹⁵ Since then *Sir Thomas More* has been performed regularly, with a landmark staging of 2005 by the Royal Shakespeare Company. After Mello Moser's book on the illustrious humanist, among other relevant publications, two important critical editions of the play were published: in 1990 Vittorio Gabrielli and Giorgio Melchiori's *Sir Thomas More: A Play by Anthony Munday and Others*, and in 2011 John Jowett's.

As early as 1968, Fernando de Mello Moser published a small essay in Portuguese, “Tomás More e o Teatro”, where he approached the influence of the theatre in Thomas More, his influence on Tudor Drama, and the importance of Bolt's play to the reassessment of the work of the English humanist, without forgetting the existence of *Sir Thomas More* (“Tomás More e o Teatro”: 164). Fernando de Mello Moser is among the first, if not the first, to summarize the presence of Thomas More in the Elizabethan Age for a Portuguese audience, without forgetting his impact and reception by the Portuguese culture of the Renaissance, namely by the major humanist Damião de Goes (1502-74) (*Caminhos*: 125-33). All this was done within the limits of Portugal in mid-late 20th century. The Christian English humanist was

inspirational for the Portuguese scholar, and provides a challenging parallel to his academic career during the 1960's, 1970's and 1980's: both were personalities working in cultural border lines, and living through cultural paradigm shifts which exploded prevailing ideological narratives. In early 21st century, after the anti-humanist and post-humanist criticisms, but always along with them – for the human should not be identified with utter bestiality and folly – a polyphonic understanding and reassessment of the human is necessary to cultivate and deepen, like the basic tenets of Thomas More, Shakespeare, and Fernando de Mello Moser.

Notes

- 1 My translation of the Portuguese original: “[...] pode parecer ousadia considerá-lo como o mais universal dos ingleses, classificação que a maior parte das pessoas, de certo e com excelentes razões atribuiria a Shakespeare” (Moser, *Caminhos*: 43).
- 2 For example, the line “Friends, Romans, countrymen” (*Julius Caesar*, 3.2.74) and the verse of “Sir Thomas More” “Friends, masters, countrymen” (6.32) form a striking parallel (Cf. *Sir Thomas More*: 428), and also the famous “Et tu, Brute” (*Julius Caesar*, 3.1.77) resonates (*Sir Thomas More*: 231). But other echoes from other plays by Shakespeare can also be tracked.
In the division of *Sir Thomas More* in scenes I follow John Jowett in excluding the reference to the previous division in acts and scenes.
- 3 Cf. Mário Vítor Bastos, “Aspects of Tyranny in Shakespeare’s Romances”. *Shakespeare and Tyranny*. Ed. K. Gregor. Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014. 19-24.
- 4 The presence of Thomas More in Shakespeare is felt in *Richard III*, *2 Henry IV* (Mistress Quickly may bear literary resemblances with Dame Alice More) and in *Henry VIII*, where Wolsey proffers the eulogy of Thomas More who preceded him as Chancellor. See “Tomás More e o Teatro”: 165-66. For further articulations of this presence with other plays by Shakespeare see *Caminhos*: 142-48.
- 5 For an extensive and more complete discussion of these problems see John Jowett’s edition.
- 6 Another example of the paradoxical living in the borders of ideology is provided by the friendship between Falstaff and Prince Hal, and its rejection by Hal when he became King Henry V. Cf. *2 Henry V* 5.5.45-49. The break between King Henry VIII and Sir Thomas More, however, is much more disruptive.
- 7 As a matter of fact the Lollard leader John Oldcastle, a Protestant martyr *avant la lettre*, provides an perfect mirror image of Sir Thomas More. Incidentally Munday also collaborated on a play about the life of Oldcastle (published anonymously in 1600). Sir John Falstaff in *1 Henry IV* was born out of a satire to John Oldcastle (*Sir Thomas More*: 29).
- 8 Major sources are found in Raphael Holinshed’s *The Third Volume of Chronicles* (1587), Nicholas Harpsfield’s *The Life and Death of Sir Thomas More* (1532), and Thomas Stapleton’s *Tres Thomae* (1588). For a comprehensive examination of source material, see *Sir Thomas More*: 47-96, 473-86.
- 9 Or, alternatively, the merchants are a Lombard and a Frenchman.
- 10 Doll is also the name of Falstaff’s mistress in Shakespeare’s *2 Henry IV*. (*Sir Thomas More*: 30-1).
- 11 The bold is mine.
- 12 The play depicts the Early of Surrey as the influential poet and humanist Henry Howard (1516/7-47) although the events depicted in the play relate to his father, Thomas Howard (1473-1554) who was a close associate of Thomas More. Cf. *Sir Thomas More*: 134. As a matter of fact the Early of Surrey-the-character results from the conflation of the two historical entities.
- 13 The interpolation is mine.
- 14 The main source for this interlude is the interlude *Lusty Juventus* (published c. 1550) by R. Wever.
- 15 It is worth mentioning that Thomas More never leaves completely Bolt and is transfigured in his subsequent work.

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